The Problem of Universals and Wyclif's Alleged "Ultrarealism"

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Abstract

John Wyclif has been described as "ultrarealist" in his theory of universals. This paper attempts a preliminary assessment of that judgment and argues that, pending further study, we have no reason to accept it. It is certainly true that Wyclif is extremely vocal and insistent about his realism, but it is not obvious that the actual content of his view is especially extreme. The paper distinguishes two common medieval notions of a universal, the Aristotelian/Porphyrian one in terms of predication and the Boethian one in terms of being metaphysically common to many. On neither approach does Wyclif's theory of universals postulate new and non-standard entities besides those recognized by more usual versions of realism. Again pending further study, neither do Wyclif's views appear to assign philosophically extreme or novel roles to the entities he does recognize as universal. On the contrary, by at least one measure, his theory of universals is less extreme than Walter Burley's, as Wyclif himself observes. For Wyclif, the universal is numerically identical with its singulars, but numerical identity is governed by something weaker than the Indiscernibility of identicals.

John Wyclif (ca. 1330-84)[1] is one of the major medieval figures in the history of the problem of universals. Indeed, he has been called "the starting-point of the new forms of realism at the end of the Middle Ages."[2]

[1] The best biographical study of Wyclif is still H.B. Workman, *John Wyclif: A Study of the English Medieval Church*. 2 vols., Oxford 1926, although much there needs to be corrected. Briefer accounts may be found in Alessandro Conti, *John Wyclif*, in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2002 Edition)*. Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Stanford 2002 URL = http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2002/entries/wyclif/; Anthony Kenny, *Wyclif*, Oxford 1985 (Past Masters), and S. Harrison Thomson, *John Wyclif*, in: B.A. Gerrish, *Reformers in Profile*, Philadelphia 1967, chap. 1, 12-39.

[2] Conti 2002 (above, n. 1). For some of the people strongly influenced by Wyclif, see Alessandro Conti, *Johannes Sharpe*, in: Zalta, *(Winter 2001 Edition)* (above, n. 1): http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2001/entries/sharpe/; Conti, *Paul of Venice*, in: Zalta *(Fall 2001 Edition)* (above, n. 1): http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2001/entries/paul-venice/; Conti, *Robert Alyngton*, in: Zalta *(Fall 2001 Edition)* (above, n. 1): http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2001/entries/alyngton/; Conti, *William Penbygull*, in: Zalta *(Fall 2001 Edition)*, (above, n. 1): http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2001/entries/penbygull/.

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Yet it was only with the edition and simultaneous English translation of his *Tractatus de universalibus* in 1985 that Wyclif's metaphysical views began to be seriously studied at all.[3] As late as 1982, the only mention of his metaphysics in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* occurs in a single footnote and refers only to his "indivisibilism" on the question of the structure of continua.[4] Earlier studies, although sometimes informative, are generally not helpful for understanding the intricacies of Wyclif's metaphysics.[5]

One partial exception is Robson.[6] Although his *Wyclif and the Oxford Schools* is primarily concerned with Wyclif's metaphysical theories only insofar as they affected his theology, and although of course the book predated a reliable edition of the *Tractatus de universalibus*, nevertheless it contains a fair amount of detail about Wyclif's views on universals, as well as on time, modality, and the impossibility of annihilation.

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[3] John Wyclif, *Tractatus de Universalibus*, ed. Ivan J. Mueller, Oxford 1985; John Wyclif, *On Universals (Tractatus de Universalibus)*, transl. Anthony Kenny, Oxford 1985. Line numbers in this volume are closely coordinated with those in Wyclif, *Tractatus de Universalibus*, ed. Mueller, so that the same numbers may be used for both. References will therefore be given by page number in Wyclif, transl. Kenny, followed by the corresponding reference to Wyclif, ed. Mueller, including chapter, lines, and page number. Since then, some of the major secondary literature includes Alessandro Conti, *Essenza ed essere nel pensiero della tarda scolastica (Burley, Wyclif, Paolo Veneto)*, in: Medioevo: Rivista di storia della filosofia medievale, 15 (1989), 235-67; id., *Logica intensionale e metafisica dell'essenza in John Wyclif*, Bullettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medioevo e Archivo muratoriano, 99.1 (1993), 159-219; id., *Analogy and Formal Distinction: On the Logical Basis of Wyclif's Metaphysics*, in: Medieval Philosophy and Theology, 6 (1997), 133-65; Conti 2002 (Wyclif; above, n. 1); Kenny 1985 (above, n. 1), especially chaps. 1-3; Anthony Kenny, *The Realism of the* De Universalibus, in: A. Kenny (ed.), *Wyclif in His Times*, Oxford 1986, chap. 2, 17-29; Norman Kretzmann, *Continua, Indivisibles, and Change in Wyclif's Logic of Scripture*, in: Kenny (ed.) 1986, chap. 3, 31-65; Stephen E. Lahey, Stephen E., *Philosophy and Politics in the Thought of John Wyclif*, Cambridge 2003; Paul Vincent Spade, *Introduction*, in: Wyclif, transl. Kenny vii-l.

[4] John E. Murdoch, *Infinity and Continuity*, in: Norman Kretzmann, *et al.*, *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy: From the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism 1100-1600*, Cambridge 1982, chap. 28, 564-91, on p. 576 n. 36.

[5] See, e.g., Gotthard Victor Lechler, *John Wycliffe and His English Precursors*, trans. Peter Lorimer, Rev. ed., London 1884 [originally published 1878]; Michael Henry Dziewicki, *An Essay on Wyclif's Philosophical System*, in: H. Dziewicki (ed.), *Johannis Wyclif Miscellanea philosophica*. 2 vols., London 1902-1905 [Reprinted New York and Frankfurt/Main 1966], vol. 1 (1902), v-xxvii; S. Harrison Thomson, *The Philosophical Basis of Wyclif's Theology*, in: The Journal of Religion, 11 (1931), 86-116. Nevertheless, it hardly needs to be said that all subsequent work on Wyclif owes an incalculable debt particularly to the heroic labors of Dziewicki and Thomson.

[6] J.A. Robson, *Wyclif and the Oxford Schools: The Relation of the 'Summa de ente' to Scholastic Debates at Oxford in the Later Fourteenth Century*, Cambridge 1961.

Chapter 6 of Robson's book describes Wyclif as an "ultrarealist" about universals. Such labels are generally not very helpful in coming to a clear understanding of an author's views. But in this case the designation "ultrarealist" serves at least to introduce one of the things I want to touch on in this paper: Where does Wyclif fit on the spectrum of medieval theories about universals? Are his views as extreme as Robson's description suggests? Despite the labors of many scholars in recent years,[7] it is still too early to attempt a definitive answer to that question; too many aspects of Wyclif's doctrine are still unclear. Nevertheless, it is not too early to make some relevant observations.

I

Whatever our final verdict about the *content* of Wyclif's theory of universals, whether it is an "ultrarealism" or not, it is undeniably true that he is at least "ultra-insistent" about his realism; he stresses his commitment to universals repeatedly and in very strong terms. In his *Tractatus de universalibus*, for instance, Wyclif remarks that "all envy or actual sin is caused by the lack of an ordered love of universals."[8]

Again, he says, there are four main reasons why certain people do not believe in universals. First, their reason is clouded because they are too devoted to the senses. Second, they are confused by various lines of sophistry. Third, they are just arrogant and pompous. And fourth, they are badly educated.[9]

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[7] See the literature cited in n. 3 above.

[8] Wyclif, transl. Kenny 1985 (above, n. 3), 22 = Wyclif, ed. Mueller 1985 (above, n. 3), 3.144-46, p. 77.

[9] Wyclif, transl. Kenny 1985 (above, n. 3), 24-5 = Wyclif, ed. Mueller 1985 (above, n. 3), 3.251-74, p. 82: "There are, then, four reasons why there is so much disagreement among scholastics about universals, and why there is so much difference from the ancients.

"The first cause is the darkening of the reason by the strong instress of sensible objects, which prevent it from rising to the universals of sensibles, which come first in the order of nature. It is in this state, for the most part, that we find the vulgar and the worldly.

"The second cause is that the ears of the sophists think they detect discord among the conclusions which must necessarily be admitted as a consequence of postulating universals. For some, like sophists indeed, wish not only to know, but to be seen to know; they wish to avoid not only what is really absurd but also what seems absurd.

"The third cause is the arrogance of many people, who want to stand out from others, or bombastically defend what they have once said, as if they were incapable of passing from ignorance to knowledge. . . .

"The fourth cause is the lack of instruction and the fear of the possible counter arguments."

Furthermore, he goes on, realist philosophy seems to be under a kind of special divine protection! For, while the relation between the three persons of the Trinity and the one divine nature is not exactly the same as the relation between individuals and a universal nature in which they all participate, still the similarities between the two cases are so instructive that Wyclif suspects it is for this reason—for the light the theory of universals sheds on the Trinity—that God sees to it that realism in philosophy is never allowed to die out completely.[10]

But much of that may be perhaps regarded as no more than bluster.[11] It means that Wyclif insisted on his realism, and insisted on it loudly and in striking language. But it does not necessarily mean his doctrine is in itself an especially extreme form of realism.

II

Several distinct notions of a universal were in circulation throughout the Middle Ages. One comes from Aristotle's *De interpetatione* 7 $17^{a}38$-$^{b}1$ (my translation):

> Among *things*, some are universal while others are singular. By "universal" I mean that which is apt to be predicated of many, by "singular" that which is not. For example, man is a universal, Callias a singular.

The end of the first sentence of the quotation is, to be sure, strictly speaking ambiguous. A "singular" (or "individual") is *not* "apt to be predicated of many." But this could be either because it is apt to be predicated of *one thing* only or because it is not the kind of thing that can be "predicated" at all, either of one thing or of many. In favor of the latter reading, we have Aristotle, who says in *Categories* 2 $1^{b}3$-7 (my translation):

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[10] Wyclif, transl. Kenny 1985 (above, n. 3), 74 = Wyclif, ed. Mueller 1985 (above, n. 3), 8.621-30, p. 175: "But there is a great dissimilarity between the relation between the common divine nature and its persons, and the relation between specific nature and its persons. So the knowledge of universals is the principal step on the ladder of wisdom towards the exploration of hidden truths. And this, I believe, is the reason why God has not permitted the doctrine of universals to die out altogether. In the highest Trinity the Father is everything that the Son is, because he is all the substance or essence which the Son is. If so, what wonder is it if man is that one thing that a donkey is, namely general substance?"

[11] Perhaps not the first remark. Kenny 1986 (above, n. 3), 29, comments, "Wyclif is prepared to go so far as to say that all actual sin is caused by the lack of an ordered love of universals: because sin consists in preferring lesser goods to greater good and in general the more universal good is the greater good."

> Some things neither are *in* a subject nor *are said* of a subject, like this or that man and this or that horse. For nothing like these is either *in* a subject or *said of* a subject. Things individual and numerically one are absolutely not said of any subject, . . .

Porphyry, however, opts for the former reading. In his *Isagoge* he states that an individual is "said of" one thing only,[12] and many medieval authors followed him. Thus universals, on this reading, are "predicated of many," whereas individuals or singulars are predicated of a single thing only.

But what kind of relation is predication? Nowadays, it is generally treated as a matter of language. That is, *terms* are taken to be what are predicated. Either they are predicated *of* other terms (for example, the term 'man' is predicated of the term 'Socrates') or, in a looser sense, we sometimes say terms are predicated of things (for example, the term 'man' is predicated of the actual human being Socrates); but we do *not* generally say that non-linguistic things are predicated of other things, that *the things themselves* are predicates.

Nevertheless, there is a long and quite reputable philosophical tradition that does say just this. According to this tradition, predication is in fact *primarily* a relation among things, and predication relations involving language (or at least the true ones) are based on and derived from this more basic metaphysical relation of what might be called "real predication."

Everyone recognizes that certain *terms* can be "predicated of many," so that of course there are "universals" in this sense in language. But are there in addition non-linguistic *things* that are predicated of many in the way described? An affirmative answer is realism, a negative one nominalism.[13]

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[12] Porphyry, *Isagoge et In Aristotelis Categorias commentarium*, ed. Adolfus Busse, Berlin 1887, 2.17-20, and 7.16-19. See the translation in: Paul Vincent Spade, *Five Texts on the Mediaeval Problem of Universals: Porphyry, Boethius, Abelard, Duns Scotus, Ockham*, Indianapolis 1994, 2, § (8): "For among predicates, some are said of one thing only, for example individuals like 'Socrates', and 'he' and 'this'. Others are said of several things, such as genera, species, differences, properties, and common accidents, although not accidents that are proper to something." Again, Spade 1994, 6, § (35): "For the most general genus is said of all the genera and species and individuals under it, while the genus prior to the most specific species is said of all the most specific species and of individuals, and what is only a species is said of all the individuals. But the individual is said of only one of the particulars."

[13] Sometimes people want to allow intermediary positions between realism and nominalism, for instance "conceptualism" or "moderate realism" (conceived as something less than full-blown realism). I see little point in trying to find an intermediary between "yes" and "no," and since the success or failure of any theory on this topic will ultimately depend

Wyclif was certainly a realist in this "predicational" sense: ". . . it is a common feature of all universals, as Porphyry says, to be predicated of many things."[14] Again, the predication of one term of another:[15]

> . . . is the sense much talked about my modern writers, who think that there is no other. But in fact this kind of predication is modeled on real predication, the third kind of predication which is being shared by or said of many things in common. It is in this manner that every actual universal is predicated of its inferiors in nature.

As Anthony Kenny has observed, for Wyclif "the key to the understanding of universals is a grasp of the nature of predication."[16]

Note that realism in this "predicational" sense *need* not be subject to any of the metaphysical difficulties often raised against realism. Everything will depend on the details of what this "real predication" is taken to be. If, for instance, it is interpreted in such a way that Platonic Forms or Divine Ideas are "predicated" of the things modeled on them, then the Forms or Ideas are indeed universals in the predicational sense. But, unless a given theory makes additional claims, such universals are not subject to the metaphysical objection that universals would have to be "in many places at once," or to the objection that universals would have to be conjoined with contraries at the same time (for instance, animality is conjoined with rationality and humanity in Socrates but with irrationality and asininity in Brunellus the ass), thus violating the Law of Contraries.[17]

Wyclif does regard the Divine Ideas as universals: "The first and foremost kind [of universal]," he says, "is the eternal notion or exemplar idea in God."[18] But there is nothing especially extreme or radical about posit-

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on the details, not on the label, I prefer to keep the terminology as simple as possible. For more on this point, see Spade 1985 (above, n. 3), xiii, n. 14.

[14] Wyclif, transl. Kenny 1985 (above, n. 3), p. 1 = Wyclif, ed. Mueller 1985 (above, n. 3), 1.25-26, p. 16.

[15] Wyclif, transl. Kenny 1985 (above, n. 3), p. 1 = Wyclif, ed. Mueller 1985 (above, n. 3), 1.31-37, p. 17.

[16] Kenny 1986 (above, n. 3), 17. Conti 2002 (Wyclif; above, n. 1), § 2.1, notes Wyclif's general tendency toward the hypostatization of logical and linguistic relations, and indeed calls this "the main characteristic of his philosophical style."

[17] Abelard raises the latter objection, among others, against William of Champeaux's original theory of universals. See Martin M. Tweedale, *Abailard on Universals*. Amsterdam 1976, 95-111, and especially Peter Overton King, *Peter Abailard and the Problem of Universals*, 2 vols. (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University 1982), Chap. 3 (137-73).

[18] Wyclif, transl. Kenny 1985 (above, n. 3), 13 (my addition) = Wyclif, ed. Mueller 1985 (above, n. 3), 2.167-68, p. 59. Wyclif cites Grosseteste's *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics*, 1.7 (Robertus Grosseteste, *In Aristotelis Posteriorum Analyticorum libros*, Walter Burleigh, *Super*

ing Divine Ideas and recognizing them as general exemplary causes of creatures; indeed, that was the normal view in the Middle Ages. Is it any more extreme or radical to think of that exemplary causality as a kind of "real predication"?

On the contrary, one might very well have a generous theory of real predication according to which many different kinds of entities turn out to be "predicated of many," and so are universals in the predicational sense. But such a theory is not going to be "ultrarealist" in any sense that makes it philosophically extreme unless those entities include additional ones not found in other realist theories, or unless they are assigned novel roles they do not play in other theories; as long as commonly accepted entities play their usual philosophical roles, it makes little philosophical difference whether some of those roles are interpreted as relations of "real predication." Does Wyclif's theory then postulate new entities or give them novel roles to play that we do not find in other medieval realist theories? That remains to be seen.

III

But there are other ways of defining a universal too, and accordingly other ways of drawing the distinction between realism and nominalism. One very influential definition comes from Boethius's *Second Commentary on Porphyry's Isagoge*, and may be called the "metaphysical definition" of a universal. According to Boethius,[19] if genera and species are going to be "shared" or "common" in the relevant way, it must be:

> **(a)** as a whole, not "part by part" in the way a loaf of bread, for instance, can be said to be common to or shared by all those who take a slice. No, when people say that all human beings share a common human nature, they mean that I have exactly what you have of humanity, not that we have distinct pieces or fragments of some larger whole.[20]

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libros Posteriorum Analyticorum Aristotelis. Venice: Gregorius de Gregoriis, 15 July 1514. Photoreprint Frankfurt/Main 1966, fol. 8va; Robertus Grosseteste, *Commentarius in Posteriorum Analyticorum libros*, ed. Pietro Rossi, Firenze 1981, 139-40, lines 103-11).

[19] Boethius, *In Isagogen Porphyrii commenta*, editio secunda, I.10, ed. Samuel Brandt, Vienna 1906, 162.15-163.3. See the translation in Spade 1994 (above, n. 11), 22, §§ (14)-(18).

[20] We do of course sometimes speak of "humanity" and mean something like the "whole human race," that is, the *collection* of all human beings taken together. But while there were theories of "collective realism" in the Middle Ages that interpreted universals as such collections, this is not what was generally meant by a universal. "Collective realism" is

> **(b)** at the same time, not in succession in the way I might own a house—the *whole* and not just a part of it—but then sell it to you, so that afterwards you own the whole house and not just a part of it. No, we don't have to *take turns* having the whole of human nature.
>
> **(c)** in more than the merely "external" way in which, for instance, a stage play can be said to be shared *as a whole* and *at the same time* by all those in the audience.[21] No, human nature enters into our very structure; it is intrinsic to us, not extrinsic. It is a metaphysical "ingredient" of us.

Boethius concludes:

> For it [genus] is supposed to be common in such a way that both the whole of it is in all its singulars, and at one time, and also it is able to constitute and form the substance of what it is common to.[22]

Note that on this "metaphysical definition," Platonic Forms or Divine Ideas will not normally be counted as universals, at least not without considerable additional claims made about them. For they fail Boethius's requirement **(c)**; while they certainly do play a crucial exemplary and causal role in "constituting and forming the substance" of the things produced in accordance with them, they are not *in* those things but (in the case of Plato's Forms) in a separated realm of pure Being as distinct from the realm of Becoming,[23] or (in the case of the Divine Ideas) in the eternal mind of God as distinct from the contingent world of creatures.

Wyclif is a realist in this metaphysical sense as well as in the predicational sense. Thus, at the very beginning of the *Tractatus de universalibus*,

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associated with the early-twelfth century figure Joscelin of Soissons, and was criticized by Abelard. See Alfred J. Freddoso, *Abailard on Collective Realism*, in: The Journal of Philosophy, 75 (1978), 527-38; King 1982 (above, n. 17), Chap. 8 and Appendix I.d; and Tweedale 1976 (above, n. 16), 113-5. King 1982, 187-8, argues that the traditional attribution to Joscelin of the text *De generibus et speciebus* containing a collective realist theory is based on an error.

[21] The stage-play is Boethius's own example. See Boethius, ed. sec., ed. Brandt 1906 (above, n. 19), 162.22, and Spade 1994 (above, n. 12), 22, § (17). Do not be misled. There is a sense in which the stage-play takes time and so cannot be viewed as a whole *at the same time*. But the point is that we don't have to take turns viewing it.

[22] Boethius, ed. sec., ed. Brandt 1906 (above, n. 19), 162.24-163.3, and Spade 1994 (above, n. 19), 22, § (18). Boethius is mainly thinking about the category of substance, and has been talking about genus and species, which are essential ingredients. Presumably the words "constitute and form the substance" will have to be adjusted appropriately to accommodate categories besides substance and predicables besides genus and species.

[23] I am of course thinking of those passages in Plato where the Forms are regarded as "separated." There are other passages, notably *Parmenides* 131$^{a\text{-}b}$, where the Forms do sound much more like Boethian universals.

he distinguishes three kinds of universals. The second, he says "is universal by community, a thing, for instance, shared by many supposits, such as human nature and other general and specific natures."[24]

Indeed, in another passage discussed in the recent literature, Wyclif appeals to the authority of Robert Grosseteste to distinguish no fewer than *five* kinds of universals:[25]

> The first and foremost kind is the eternal notion or exemplar idea in God. The second kind is the common created notion in the superior causes, like the intelligences and the heavenly spheres. The third kind of universal is the common form rooted in its individuals. This, says Grosseteste, is what Aristotle's genera and species are. Fourthly, there is the universal which is the common form in its accidents, apprehended by the lowest form of intellect. There is a fifth kind of universal—signs and mental acts—which Grosseteste sets aside as irrelevant to his concerns.

The first kind are just the Divine Ideas, as discussed above. The second are the reflections of the Divine Ideas in the "intelligences," the separated substances that are the movers of the celestial spheres in medieval cosmology. These sound quaint and unnecessary perhaps to modern ears, but they were standard feature of much medieval thought. The third kind of universal, which Wyclif identifies with Aristotle's genera and species, seems to be universal in the "metaphysical" sense defined, as we have seen, by Boethius. The fourth kind is not entirely clear, but seems to be the kind of universal the human intellect abstracts from its encounter with the sensible accidents of the individual thing. The fifth kind are just universals in the "predicational" sense described above.[26]

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[24] Wyclif, transl. Kenny 1985 (above, n. 3), p. 1 = Wyclif, ed. Mueller 1985 (above, n. 3), 1.11-13, p. 15. The first kind of universal is universal by "causality," a single cause of many effects; the third kind is universal by "representation," a sign that represents or signifies many things at once. (Wyclif, transl. Kenny 1985 (above, n. 3), p. 1 = Wyclif, ed. Mueller 1985 (above, n. 3), 1.6-16, pp. 15-16.) For nominalists, of course, the third kind of universal is the only kind there is. Wyclif draws the same threefold division in many places. See Spade 1985 (above, n. 3), xviii, n. 21.

[25] Wyclif, transl. Kenny 1985 (above, n. 3), p. 13 = Wyclif, ed. Mueller 1985 (above, n. 3), 2.167-77, p. 59. For recent discussion of the passage, see Kenny 1986 (above, n. 3), 23-4, and Lahey 2003 (above, n. 3), 72-4. For a discussion of the relation of this passage to the threefold classification of universals mentioned above, see Lahey 2003, 72-4. For Grosseteste, see Grosseteste, ed. Venice 1514/Frankfurt M. 1966 (above, n. 18), fol. 8va; Grosseteste, ed. Rossi 1981 (above, n. 17), 139-42, lines 103-57. Grosseteste in this passage does not explicitly exclude the fifth kind of universal Wyclif mentions; he simply fails to mention it. (See also n. 18 above.)

[26] The mention of "mental acts" under the fifth kind is probably a consequence of the fact that William of Ockham and many nominalists regarded universal *concepts* both as mental acts and as terms in a kind of mental language.

Although the details are not entirely clear, there certainly appears to be no appeal to surprising or novel entities here. On the contrary, everything mentioned in this list, even the "notions" in the "intelligences," is familiar from other medieval realist theories that are not regarded as especially extreme. There is nothing "ultrarealist" at least in this text.

IV

But if Wyclif does not postulate new and unheard of entities in his realism, does he nevertheless give them radically novel roles to play? Could he still be regarded as philosophically extreme in that respect? It is surely premature to hazard a definitive answer to that question, since so much of Wyclif's view is still not completely understood. Nevertheless, there is at least one passage where Wyclif himself describes his position as a kind of "middle of the road" theory. In *Tractatus de universalibus*, Chap. 4, Wyclif explicitly contrasts his view with the views of Aquinas and Giles of Rome, on the one hand, and Walter Burley's on the other:[27]

> Thus, some say that every substance is particular [*singularis*], and is universal only by being apprehended universally; just as an artefact is called human, on the basis of a humanity outside itself, and a thing seen, or understood, or otherwise described on the basis of something outside itself. And this opinion is attributed to St Thomas, Giles and many others.
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> The second way says that the universal is not any of its singulars since it is contrasted with a particular because it is common, or shared, or predicable, and is prior by nature and imperceptible by the senses and different in many other ways . . . And this opinion seems to have been held by Master Walter Burleigh and many others . . .
>
> I, for my part, take a middle way, reconciling the extremes; I agree with the first opinion that every universal is particular, and *vice versa* though the two are formally distinct from each other.

As Wyclif tells it, then, some people held that every substance is a singular—and presumably every accident too, although Wyclif does not explicitly address that point. In short, *everything* in reality is singular. Nevertheless, those same singular real things can be apprehended by the mind in a universal way. When that happens, these same singular things are said to be "universals."

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[27] Wyclif, transl. Kenny 1985 (above, n. 3), pp. 27-28 (my addition) = Wyclif, ed. Mueller 1985 (above, n. 3), 4.40-59, pp. 86-87.

This is not so odd as it perhaps sounds. What it means is that singulars and universals are not two different kinds of things. Wyclif explains that, on this view, to call something a universal is to denominate it "extrinsically."[28] In the same way, he says, we might say that some artificial object is a "human" product, or that an object is a "seen" or an "understood" object. In all these cases, we are describing the product or object in terms of its relation to things extrinsic to it, either to the human producer or to the eye or mind that sees or understands the thing. So too, this theory holds, with universals. To call something a universal is to describe it in terms of its relations to an intellect that apprehends it in a certain general way. Or to put it differently, and in a later vocabulary, the term 'universal' *denotes* a singular but *connotes* the general way that singular is understood by the mind.

Wyclif does not spell out this view in any detail. In particular, he does not tell us how the theory accounts for the fact that the mind is *able* to apprehend singulars in this general way at all. Nevertheless this view, whatever its details, is attributed, he says, to Aquinas, to Giles of Rome, and to "others." Among these "others," I would suggest Henry of Harclay as a very likely candidate, although it is hard to be sure on the basis of the little Wyclif tells us.[29]

But the correct attribution of the theory is not important here. The main thing for our purposes is *why* Wyclif bothers to mention this view. First of all, it *is* a metaphysical realism, although not in the Boethian sense. Universals *are* real entities outside the mind. They are not concepts, and they are not just fictions we make up. They really exist. And they are numerically the same things as the singulars.

On this theory, it is correct to say that the singular *is* the universal and vice versa. And the kind of identity indicated by the copula 'is' is the strongest available; the singular and the universal are *numerically* identical. They are *so* identical that there is no metaphysical basis whatever in the object itself for a distinction between singular and universal.

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[28] Wyclif, ed. Mueller 1985 (above, n. 3), 4.43, p. 86: "extrinsice denominata."

[29] On Harclay's theory of universals, see Gideon Gál, *Henricus de Harclay: Quaestio de significato conceptus universalis*, in: Franciscan Studies, 31 (1971), 178-234 and Marilyn McCord Adams, Universals in the Early Fourteenth Century, in Kretzmann 1982 (above, n. 4), Chap. 20, 411-39, on 423-35. Wyclif mentions Aquinas and Giles briefly again in the *Tractatus de universalibus*, Wyclif, transl. Kenny 1985 (above, n. 3), p. 167; compare Wyclif, ed. Mueller 1985 (above, n. 3), 15.36-38, p. 354.

To that extent at least, the object is metaphysically a seamless whole. If nevertheless we draw a distinction between singulars and universals, that can only be by appealing to something "extrinsic," to something completely outside the object we are talking about, to the way the mind *apprehends* the object.

Wyclif agrees with this theory in part. The universal *must* be numerically identical with the singular if it is going to be predicated of the singular by real predication.[30] To this extent then Wyclif agrees with the theory he attributes to Aquinas and Giles of Rome.

But there is an obvious problem: the logical principle of the Indiscernibility of Identicals. If *A* and *B* are truly identical, then we ought to be able to say exactly the same thing about *A* as about *B*, since after all they are *the same thing*. Yet it appears we cannot say the same things about universals as we can say about singulars. The whole notion of a universal, for instance, is that it can be common to or shared by or predicated of many things at once. The whole notion of a singular, on the other hand, is that it cannot. Hence, it would appear, it is logically impossible to identify universals with singulars.

Furthermore, if Socrates is a man, then Socrates is identical with the universal man. But Plato is a man too, and so he too is identical with that same universal man. Hence, in virtue of the symmetry and transitivity of identity, it would seem to follow that Socrates is identical with Plato, which is plainly false!

Wyclif therefore describes another theory of universals, Walter Burley's theory. Burley held, at least in part for the reasons just given, that although universals are real, and although they are really present in their singular instances, nevertheless they are *in no way* identical with those singulars. Indeed, Burley is famous for having held that there is a *real* distinction between individuals and their constituent universals; Socrates, for instance, is really distinct from his humanity.[31] And for Burley, the (negative) cri-

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[30] See Spade 1985 (above, n. 3), xx-xxxvi. This will be true at least for universals of the third kind in the above list of five, the ones Wyclif identifies with Aristotle's genera and species.

[31] See Adams 1982 (above, n. 29), 423. See also Paul Vincent Spade, *Walter Burley on the Simple Supposition of Singular Terms*, in: Topoi 16.1 (1997), 7-13, on 10-1. Conti has shown that this thesis is characteristic only of Burley's later (post-1324) view (Alessandro Conti, *Walter Burley*, in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2004 Edition)*. Edward N. Zalta, ed. URL = http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2004/entries/burley/).

terion of real distinction is precisely the Indiscernibility of Identicals; if one can say different things about *A* and *B*, then they are really distinct.[32]

As Wyclif presents them, then, these two kinds of realism make opposite mistakes. The first theory preserves the identity of singular and universal that is required for Wyclif's account of predication. But it goes too far in not providing *any* basis in the object itself for a distinction between singular and universal, and so runs afoul of the principle of the Indiscernibility of Identicals. Burley's theory, on the other hand, avoids these problems by denying any kind of identity between singular and universal. But by so doing, he seems to leave the theory of predication without any metaphysical basis at all.

In this situation, Wyclif does what any respectable scholastic would do; he draws a distinction: "I, for my part, take a middle way, reconciling the extremes; I agree with the first opinion that every universal is particular, and *vice versa* though the two are formally distinct from each other."[33] And of course it is by stipulating such a distinction between singular and universal that Wyclif grants something also to Burley's theory.

Wyclif's theory of identity and distinction leads to many questions I do not intend to address here.[34] For the present let us just say that for Wyclif if *A* and *B* are formally distinct then they are numerically identical and yet *not* indiscernible. The Indiscernibility of Identicals, then, is *not* applicable to all kinds of identity. Furthermore, since numerical identity is compatible with the formal distinction, it is *not* both symmetrical and transitive. In short, pending all the details, it appears to be designed to be exactly the sort of thing needed to solve the problems just raised.

In at least this passage, therefore, Wyclif himself thinks of his own theory of universals as moderating between two more extreme views.[35] In the end, we have not yet found any reason to think of Wyclif's theory of universals as "ultrarealist" or as particularly extreme in any way except for the urgent rhetoric he uses to insist on it.

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[32] See Adams 1982 (above, n. 29), 423.

[33] See n. 27 above.

[34] See the literature cited in n. 3 above, especially Spade 1985 (above, n. 3), xx-xxxi.

[35] It is perhaps ironic in assessing Wyclif's "ultrarealism" to note that Adams describes Burley's theory itself as a "moderate realism." (Adams 1982 (above, n. 29), 422.) Wyclif's theory is, at least in this passage, even more moderate.